Herpes info for women who have sex with women

1) Dear Alice,

All the information I have found about herpes is written for heterosexual couples. Are there studies about herpes in lesbians? How can I prevent transmission of the virus to my partner? I'm totally asymptomatic.

Lesbian

2) Dear Alice,

I'm female, in a relationship with another female. She is okay with the fact that I have herpes. I JUST NEED TO KNOW HOW TO PROTECT HER from contracting the virus. Please help me out here.

Answer

Dear Lesbian and Reader 2,

It's great that you both reached out to learn about how to minimize the risk of herpes transmission. Although neither of you mention which strain you're discussing, most folks are referring to herpes simplex virus 1 and 2 when talking about sexual activity and risk. No matter your partner’s sex assigned at birth, herpes prevention requires effective communication between partners and the use of barrier contraceptive methods. One of the most critical steps you can take to protect your partners from contracting herpes is to tell them that you have the virus. By being open and honest, you can communicate about what risks you are and aren’t willing to take together. This conversation may also help them better understand herpes — both from the perspective of protecting themselves, as well as discovering what your experiences with the virus have been. Not only will this help you reduce the risk of transmission to your partner, it may also help you develop a stronger and more open relationship.

Strategies for preventing herpes transmission really boil down to preventing contact with infected areas of skin; this holds true for any intimate partners, regardless of gender or sex assigned at birth. The herpes virus is spread via direct skin-to-skin contact both when the virus is active (sores are present) and possibly when an infected person has no visible sores (a process known
as viral shedding). Depending on the type of herpes and the type of sex, the risk of transmission may vary. The Go Ask Alice! Q&A Break down of different herpes strains and oral sex [3] can help to explain these scenarios in more detail. Prior to an outbreak of herpes, most people notice an itching or tingling sensation. This serves as a warning that an outbreak is imminent and for you and your partner to avoid touching the area where sores normally appear. Unfortunately, many viruses can spread even when you don't have sores or other symptoms. For this reason, many partners practice safer sex every time they're intimate (think barriers that cover the skin where sores normally occur).

For women who sleep with women (and everyone else), the first step in reducing risk of transmission is to avoid contact with infected areas of skin, whether on the mouth, vulva, thighs, butt, or elsewhere, when sores are present. Sores contain high quantities of the virus and increase the chance of transmission. People who have herpes can talk with a health care provider about medications that can help control outbreaks. These viral suppressive medications are believed to help reduce the severity and frequency of outbreaks.

To reduce the risk of transmitting the virus, it’s wise to cover the area where sores typically appear. You can use a dental dam (or non-lubricated condom that you cut down the middle and spread open) to cover the vagina, clitoris, anus, or other area. If penetration is occurring (with fingers, sex toys, etc.), you can cover the object with a condom, medical glove, or other barrier that fits the object. For those who are unable to or dislike latex, many of these items are also available latex-free. In a pinch, non-microwavable plastic wrap can also serve as a barrier. It’s also good for you to keep track of where most of your herpes episodes occur. On your mouth in the form of cold sores? On your inner thighs? On some part of your genitals? Covering the most frequently affected parts of your body may help prevent spreading the herpes virus. You may also want to check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Genital Herpes [4] website for more information.

You and your partner may decide to use barriers, avoid intimate contact when you believe the herpes virus is present on the surface of your skin, take viral suppressive medication, or a combination of these approaches. Whatever the decision, it's good to make it together, recognizing the risks involved and sharing the pleasures.

Alice!
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